

# An important sign of friendship

By HE FRANK BAKER OBE

AMBASSADOR OF THE UNITED KINGDOM TO THE STATE OF KUWAIT



**FRANK BAKER** joined the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1982. In addition to many roles in the UK, he has served in Panama City, Buenos Aires, Ankara and Washington. Prior to being appointed Ambassador to Kuwait, he was Deputy Director in London with responsibility for the Middle East. He was awarded the OBE in 1997.

The Visit of His Highness The Amir is a great symbol of the enduring links between the UK and Kuwait, but as British Ambassador to Kuwait I would argue that the relationship between Great Britain and this small corner of the Gulf is about far more than pomp, ceremony and shared history.

There are few greater honours that can be bestowed upon a Head of State than to visit Her Majesty The Queen at Windsor Castle. Following on from the Presidents of global powers such as France and India, the latest recipient of this honour is His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah, the Amir of Kuwait.

The destinies of the UK and Kuwait have been entwined since the nascent city-state first made contact with the East India Company in the mid-eighteenth century. At that time this small community of ship-builders, pearl-divers and traders was emerging as a hub for entrepôt trade, and it soon became an important way-station for trading routes from Iraq, the Levant and further afield through the Gulf to India.

Fast forward to 1899, and when Sheikh Mubarak the Great, the founder of modern Kuwait, found his State's independence threatened by Ottoman encroachment, the natural place to turn was the UK. A treaty of friendship was signed, whereby Kuwait became a de facto British protectorate, its independence and autonomy preserved in the face of growing threats on its borders, and its economy and foreign policy bound up with the fortunes of the British Empire.

But even since independence in 1961, Britain has continued to see itself as a friend to and, when necessary, protector of Kuwait – just as it was well before the oil rush brought great wealth to the country's shores. Indeed, the British military has sprung in to action on multiple occasions to defend Kuwaiti independence; in 1899 to deter the Ottomans, in 1921 against Nejd Bedouin affiliated with Ibn Saud, in 1961 to deter the Iraqis, and most recently in 1991 as part of Operation Desert Storm.

And tied up in all this shared history is a close relationship between the Houses of Windsor and Al-Sabah; Her Majesty The Queen visited Kuwait in 1979, and received the previous Amir, Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah, in 1995. Even further back, the first State Visit by a Kuwaiti Head of State was made by Sheikh Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the current Amir's father, who travelled to the UK in 1935, during the reign of the Queen's grandfather King George V (and coincidentally during his silver jubilee year). At that time, pearls were still Kuwait's most precious commodity and Sheikh Ahmed presented Queen Mary with a perfectly rounded pearl, said to be the largest ever found in the Gulf.

But however deeply the historic foundations are set, however impressive the scenes and protocol that will greet the Amir's arrival, these are not the only reasons why the relationship between the United Kingdom and Kuwait is as strong as it is today. The fundamental reason is the impressive edifice of shared endeavour

Prime Minister David Cameron holds a joint press conference with his Kuwaiti counterpart Sheikh Nasser Mohammed Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah



that has been built on these solid foundations of mutual respect and common values. And this can be seen right across the bilateral relationship.

Politically, the UK and Kuwait remain close partners, cooperating together in an attempt to secure stability in a difficult and ever-changing region. Both countries are working for a peaceful and just future in Syria, supporting transition towards democracy in places like Egypt and Libya, and delivering aid and development to those who need it most. Kuwait remains one of the most effective and generous providers of development assistance in the world. And Kuwait shares much with the UK in its notions of how politics should be conducted: as the current political debate in the country shows, freedom of speech is an integral part of Kuwaiti culture; its democratically elected parliament is the most vocal in the region; and since independence its trajectory towards further democratisation has been slow yet purposeful, reforming not revolutionary. It is a trajectory that I expect to continue, and to lead in the fullness of time to a state that combines what we would see as modern political ideals with tradition, respect and an understanding of the past – a state, indeed, much like the UK.

However bilateral relations in the modern era are not just about governments. Today a tweet can go viral and travel the world in a matter of seconds. And people can travel as freely across a continent as they could across a country at the time the first Kuwaiti Amir to visit arrived in Great Britain to be greeted by the King. Today, bilateral relations are about people as much as they are about Kings, Queens, Amirs, Ministers or diplomats.

We can see that quite clearly in trade and investment. The links between Kuwait and the UK are strong and growing, but although government can help, it is individuals and businesses who really deliver the benefits to their nations. Individuals like the inspirational Mohammed Al-Shaya, who, from Kuwait, has created a retailing and franchising empire that spans the globe, with British brands at its core, creating jobs and wealth in Kuwait, the UK and further afield.

The same can be said of the Kuwaiti Investment Authority and the Kuwait Investment Office – celebrating its sixtieth anniversary this year – whose unrivalled ability to invest wisely provided Kuwait with the cushion it needed to survive its invasion, and continues to help secure the future for coming generations of Kuwaitis. But even as it has diversified amid a changing world, its investment destination of choice is, and will continue to be, the UK; creating possibilities and opportunities for Britons just as for Kuwaitis.

These are just two examples, countless more abound; the British companies working to help deliver infrastructure for Kuwait's ambitious National Development Plan, using the same zeal and skill with

which London's Olympic Park was summoned from a blighted East London brown-field site; the Kuwaiti banks taking advantage of the City of London's position as the world centre for Islamic finance; and the recently announced £500m of Kuwaiti investment in British North Sea Oil.

Beyond business, individuals throughout Kuwait and the UK travel between their respective countries, reaching hearts and minds, gaining understanding, expanding their horizons. Nearly ten thousand Britons live and work in Kuwait, enjoying the hospitality of this friendly country and escaping the searing heat in the warm waters of the Arabian Gulf. Thousands of young Kuwaitis come to the UK every year to study, taking advantage of world-class universities and making friendships and memories they will treasure forever. Kuwaiti servicemen come to study at the great centres of British military prowess, such as Sandhurst – 200 years old this year; while British servicemen continue to live and work in Kuwait, as partners and advisors to the Kuwaiti military, reflecting a defence relationship forged in friendship and strengthened on the battlefield. Culturally too links are strong – this year saw the biggest exhibition of British art ever in Kuwait, and a return exhibition featuring works by young Kuwaiti artists will open in London later this year.

So when I look back on the pomp, ceremony and grandeur of what is bound to be a memorable State Visit, while I will certainly remember the scenes set and the business done, I will also remember what lies behind it all; two peoples brought together by history, bound together by friendship, and building the future together based on common interests and common values. Interests and values that extend not just to Her Majesty and His Highness, but to those individuals within the two countries who have – as I have – found themselves acting as Ambassadors, with their hearts in both the UK and Kuwait. E

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Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh meet the then Amir Of Kuwait during their tour of the Gulf States in 1979

